

# The Art of Bathing

There isn't really a good word for some who enjoys bathing – “ablutophile” has unnecessary sexual connotations – but perhaps that's because *most* people enjoy a good bath. History is littered with famous examples. Gustave Flaubert, the unsurprisingly libidinous author of *Madame Bovary*, took very long hot baths before settling in to work, though never before 10 in the morning. Agatha Christie ate apples and plotted murders in her tub. Winston Churchill strategized from the bath, dictating to secretaries as he soaked. Dalton Trumbo, blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter, wrote in the bathtub at night, smoking and tapping out screenplays on a typewriter perched on a crowded bathtub tray. He wasn't alone though: He had a parrot actor Kirk Douglas had given him for company. Pablo Picasso reportedly took a bath when he was in need of ideas, unknowingly following the advice of legendary American actress Mae West who said, “When in doubt, take a bath.”

Baths are not only places of inspiration, they are often also the subject – witness the countless artistic depictions of bathers, by turns erotic, quotidian, vulnerable. Rembrandt's voyeuristic *Bathsheba at her Bath* portrays the object of adulterous King David's obsession as he would have seen her, while artist Natalie Häusler's 10-meter-long free-standing pool in a disused tunnel under the Rhine literally rewrites Bathsheba's story, on the tiles the tub is made from. Photographer Wolfgang Tillmans' *Jochen taking a bath* is an intimate portrayal, but in a qualitatively different way to Pierre Bonnard's paintings of his nude wife (who was hardly ever out of her bath, judging by the number of paintings he made of her in it). The artist's love of the bath is cross-cultural -- Edo-era Japanese woodblock prints of bathers range from the private to the public, the absurd and the border-line obscene. Virtually every major arts' movement has done the bath, while in film, a good bathtub scene has likewise always been a plot staple in everything from *Scarface* to *Pretty Woman*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to *The English Patient*.

What baths offer, according to researchers and experts in creativity such as psychologist Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman, is a mindful break. Bathing is meditative in its routine; as they

soap or soak, the bather turns down the burner on conscious thought and is free to daydream. Or, in neuroscientific terms, the brain enters what's called the “default mode network”, a kind of state of resting engagement. The prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain tasked with executive functioning, is relaxed; the medial frontal cortex, however, the area of the brain implicated in association, connections, emotions, is more active. Meanwhile, the warmth of the water facilitates a flood of the neurotransmitter dopamine, the brain's natural reward chemical. Dopamine makes us feel good, of course, and a small 2018 study by the University of Freiburg in Germany found that a warm, relaxing bath in the afternoon lifts the spirits at least as effectively as exercise. But this also tallies with research demonstrating that a positive mood enhances, you guessed it, creativity, and that dopamine itself is implicated in the creative process – the more dopamine released, the more areas of the brain become active. Finally, the bath offers a place where ideas are not only more likely to happen, but are also more likely to be incubated. Researchers have found that creative breakthroughs on thorny problems require both intense concentration on them and distraction from them, allowing your brain to process and connect all of the things you've been thinking about.

We know this intuitively, even without the neuroscientific explanation. Paul Valéry, the French poet and philosopher, described the bath as “the pure and shining sarcophagus”, where “light and free, the nude settles down and is assuaged.” The bather is nearly weightless, “the heat of the blood being hardly different from that of the contiguous water”, and feels themselves “being gently dissolved”: “The mind opens its veins in a dream.”

We live now in the era of the shower -- some 57 percent of Brits and 90 percent of Americans prefer the more efficient shower to the bath. But to the bath, efficiency, even cleanliness is rather beside the point. The bath presents the perfect cocktail for something more important -- inspiration.

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